DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 215 FL 021 832

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TITLE Universality vs. Particularity in Chinese Teaching and Testing.
PUB DATE 8 Mar 93
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Pre-Georgetown University Roundtable on Languages and Linguistics meeting (Washington, DC, March 8, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Chinese; Comparative Analysis; Contrastive Linguistics; English; *Language Patterns; *Language Tests; Language Universals; *Phonology; Second Language Instruction; Second Languages; *Semantics; *Syntax

ABSTRACT

It is proposed that in the teaching and testing of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL), emphasis should be placed on features that are universal to all languages rather than particular to Chinese. Shared properties of Chinese and other languages, particularly English, are illustrated through examination of three major language components: phonology, syntax, and semantics. In the realm of phonology, all languages share the same articulatory resources and all sounds can be assigned to 12 categories according to place of articulation. Even in categories traditionally recognized as unique to Chinese, uniqueness is partially exaggerated by spelling conventions. In syntax, Chinese and English share all major syntactic categories such as subject, predicate, object, attributive, adverbial, and complement, and only the rules of assembling the parts differ. With regard to semantics, most semantic features of most languages are similar; for example, all languages possess only three verb types: state, process, and action. It is further proposed that stressing universality in CFL will require: psychological preparation of students; use of old-new information theory in learning; presenting a fair picture of each language; focusing on oral communication; and de-emphasizing the particularity characteristic of research. (MSE)

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Universality vs Particularity in Chinese Teaching and Testing

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UNIVERSALITY VS PARTICULARITY IN CHINESE TEACHING AND TESTING

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Recent developments in linguistic theories and the change of time seem to call for some response in teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL). Instead of taking the language as an object of study, more and more people are now learning Chinese as a tool for communication in real life situations. Such a shift in focus naturally leads to the re-examination of our pedagogy in the CFL classroom. As an effort to provide some theoretical foundation for a communicative approach in teaching Chinese, the present paper has only one message: universality has priority over particularity in Chinese teaching and testing. I will start by explaining what I mean by these two terms and by the word priority, followed by a discussion on some universal features shared by Chinese and other languages and the particular features of Chinese, and conclude with the revelation of this concept on Chinese teaching and testing.

Universality as used in this paper refers to common features shared by Chinese and other languages. When it comes to specific examples, English will be used since most of the learners in the U.S. are English speakers. Particularity covers those characteristics of the Chinese language that have no formal equivalents in other languages. In its strict sense, it means a certain feature which is not found at all in other languages, like the use of *ba* in Chinese to front the object has no formal matching in English. In most cases, it is used in its wider sense to

indicate a disparity in any aspect of a certain feature so that there is no exact match among languages. The word "priority" is usually understood as both "prior to" in time sequence and the amount of time dedicated to the task in question. Thus the priority of universality over particularity would mean the introduction of universal features before particular features, as well as the indication that the amount of time allocated for universal features is more than that for particular ones. I will be specific in cases where a distinction is needed between the sequence of time and the amount of time.

It is also important to clarify the differences between what I call universal features here and "language universals" as defined by Comrie and others (Comrie, 1989) in the field of language universals and typology. The focus here is to find similar features among languages with Chinese as the center of attention. The origin of all languages and their evolution, or the typological characteristics of each language, is not the concern of this paper. The criteria used to determine a similar feature are therefore also different from those stressed in Comrie (Comrie, 1989).

Although English is used as examples throughout this paper, no attempt has been made to have a systematic comparison between the two languages. Based on observation and teaching experience, I will only concentrate on those aspects that are easily seen with common sense and perhaps with the help of a little linguistic training. By comparing some of the most common features in the three major components of a language: phonology, syntax and

semantics, we will have a better picture of the shared property between Chinese and other languages.

Phonology: A simple fact often obscured by the different phonological systems used by various language is that all languages are similar phonetically. In other words, they all share the same articulatory resources. All the noises we make can be summarized into 12 categories according to places of articulation. Most of consonants are similar in both English and Chinese, such as the bilabial /b/, /p/, /m/, the alveolar /d/, /t/, /n/, /l/, the velar /g/, /k/, the labial dental /f/, and the glottal /h/. Think of the *f* in *fei* in Chinese, and the /f/ in fell in English. Due to the amount of aspiration, voicing, friction, and the phonetic context in which a sound is made, the realization of two sounds are never identical, even in the same language by the same person. The realization of such a fact will help us get rid of the hair-splitting precision in any comparison. Thus we can say all the four categories of consonants listed above are similar between English and Chinese. It may also be relevant to mention that these similar consonants occupy a high percentage in the system in both languages.

Even in the categories that are traditionally regarded as the "unique" feature of Chinese, namely, the retroflex *zh, ch, sh* and the palatals *j, q, x*, the "uniqueness" is partly exaggerated by the spelling convention. The variations of the phoneme /i/ also affect the sound quality of these consonants. If we ignore the spelling, we have little difficulty in recognizing the similarity between the

s sound in Seattle, and the *x* in *xi*. In Standard Chinese: A Modular Approach (SCAMA), there is an English sound against every Chinese consonant, like the Chinese *z* versus the English beds and *q* versus cheap. Of course identical sounds in two different languages are just a myth. The point here is that we should not confuse the different in the spelling convention with the actual sound produced. And in actual sounds, not just Chinese and English, but most languages have quite a pool of similar sounds. This is the ground for universality in terms of sounds.

Syntax: In appearance, Chinese can be very different from English depending on the system used. For example, English divides all its sentences into two types: simple and complex sentences (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973). Chinese, on the other hand, has two types named major and minor (Norman, 1989) depending on the presence or absence of the subject. There are also many other ways of categorization with various names (Chao 1968, Gao 1981, Hao 1986, Hu 1979, Li and Thompson 1982, Li 1988, Li 1984). When examining the similarity versus the differences, we have to go beyond the names and look at the substance . As in the case in phonology, it is not now a sound is represented in the spelling that matters, but how it is pronounced. Here, it is not what a sentence type is called, but what the parts are that make up the whole.

From this perspective, we can again see that both languages share all the major syntactic categories like subject, predicate, object, attributive, adverbial and complement. If all the parts

that finally make up the whole are identical, what is left is only the rules of putting them together. Even here, there are more similarities than differences. In both languages, a typical statement consists of SV(O) in that order and an imperative sentence is characterized by the absence of the subject.

Among the features mentioned frequently by most studies as "different" are: the absence of a linking verb in certain patterns in Chinese; the lack of the passive voice; the topic-comment structure; and word order, especially the left-branching issue. In all of these, the differences between Chinese and other languages is not a matter of presence versus absence, but one of more or less. Of the three basic English patterns (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973) where the verb "to be" is required, the Chinese equivalents do not exclude the linking verb *shi* (to be) at all. As a matter of fact, it demands the presence of the verb in one

Ta shi hushi. (She is a nurse)

and tolerate its presence in two

Ta (shi) zai jia. (She is in the house)

Ta (shi) piaoliang. (She is beautiful)

Obviously, the emphasis is different with the use of *shi* in the Chinese sentence. The point here, however, is that the use of a linking verb is also grammatical in Chinese. On the other hand, if we look beyond English, we will find patterns like NP+ADJ and NP+PP common in other languages, such as Russian (Dinneen, 1987). It may be true that the frequency of passive sentences is much lower in Chinese than it is in English, but passive patterns with

bei, gei, rang, are certainly common in Chinese. As for the topic-comment structure, it is not difficult to find in English sentences starting with "as for" or "concerning". These are actually equivalent to the topic-comment structure in Chinese in many cases. The so-called "left-branching" structure, which can be represented as "Modifier+*de*+modified", or "attributive+head", receives much publicity not because it is so vastly different from English, but because it is the place where students often make mistakes. After all, English is also left-branching on the phrase level. Consider "the little round wooden table", in which all the modifiers are to the left of the head noun.

Semantics: Most semantic features of almost all languages are similar. Take verbs for example, regardless of the names used in various languages, all languages possess only three kinds of verbs: state, process and action verbs. Following the case grammar theory proposed by Cook (Cook, 19??), all languages are the same when it comes to logical structure with its five identifiable categories: Agent, Experiencer, Benefactive, Object, and Locative. In English, the verb "to give" would involve the giver (Agent), the thing being given (Object), and the receiver (Benefactive). In Chinese, the verb *gei* demands the same number of entities. One may argue that the verb *gei* in Chinese can also function as a preposition "for" or "to", therefore it is different from the verb "to give" in English. This, however, is a difference in the usage of *gei* as a word, and not in the logical structure of *gei* when used as a verb, like "give" in English.

The brief description in the three major components of a language as given above only serves as an example to draw our attention to the common ground among languages. Clearly, this is not a systematic comparison between Chinese and English in all the patterns and features in all the aspects of the languages. Rather, it is an assumption based on common knowledge and with specific examples to show that even in areas where people talk about differences most of the time, there are similarities.

One point to emphasize here is the need to pay attention to the distinction between name and reality. We are so used to the ways things are called that we sometimes think the name is the thing itself. In drawing our attention to the universality among languages, it is therefore important to examine the substance, and not the labels. In phonology, for example, the way a sound is spelled, or represented by alphabets, is less significant than the way it is pronounced.

Using the common sense argument, one may ask that since there are more similarities than differences, why the latter, and not the former, has held our attention for so long? This is partly due to what I call the familiarity factor, (we don't usually notice things that are familiar in our life, as we are not often aware of the air we breathe), partly due to the emphasis on the differences as a result of the focus in traditional teaching, and partly due to the repetition of the myths in this field, such as the myth about a class of words called classifier and the semantically significant tone.

It has always been claimed that Chinese has a unique class of words called measure word, or classifier, and English has none. Look at the underlined words in the following example: a piece of paper, a bundle of straw, a pack of cigarette, a bottle of wine, a cup of tea, a glass of beer, a pot of plant, a copy of the document; and on a slightly different level, a pack of wolves, a flock of birds, a group of people, and the list can go on to considerable length. Of course the number of words required in English between a number and a noun are different from Chinese, so are the type of nouns that require a classifier, or measure word. It is not true, however, to say that the use of classifier is unique in Chinese. If we put this in the teaching context and tell the students that this feature of using a classifier is similar to English, except that the place for them and the words used are different from time to time, students generally would find it less scaring in the first place, and perhaps find it easier to accept such a phenomenon in stead of cursing the "strangeness" of the Chinese language.

Tone seems to be another myth that works in opposite direction. That is, Chinese has tones and English doesn't. During my years of teaching, I found a rising tone in English, such as a child calling "Mum" when making a request, matches the second tone in Chinese very well; while a very angry "how!" when one is impatient or angry is very close to the falling tone in Chinese. To put it in simple words, the difference here is a matter of distribution and not substance. Each of the four tones in Chinese

has its equivalent in English, though not on the same level. As for light tone, it is certainly not a new concept for speakers of English.

What we all know by now is that whatever can be expressed in one language can also be expressed in another language. When the focus of attention is on the form of the language, as in the case of traditional teaching, it is natural that people tend to notice the differences. Once the goal of teaching moves from the form of the language to its functions, the similarities among languages will inevitably take the foreground.

The suggestion that universality should have priority over particularity in Chinese teaching and testing can be understood in the following aspects. Psychological preparation of students; old-new information theory in learning; the number of features on each side when the language is taken as a whole, that is, presenting a fair picture of the language since there are more similarity than particularity; the final goal of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate, which needs the core of the language and not a particular textbook; and the difference focus of attention between research and teaching.

Psychologically, students are usually scared, with the exception of few brave ones, to learn from the very beginning that this is a totally different language from English. As a matter of fact, some teachers would tell the students "just forget about English". One problem with human being is that we cannot unlearn and to "forget about" the language you have been using all your

life is simply impossible. The feeling would be different if they are told that it is basically the same as the language they know, with some particularities here and there. They can be instructed to use their knowledge of the language they already know, such as the SVO pattern, the use of classifiers, the ability to express the same concept of time or aspect with different means. Such "friendly" preparation would help them feel more confident in the process of learning. On the other hand, if they are told from the beginning, and perhaps reinforced time and again, that this is a totally different language from anything they know, the result may not be good. For they would be scared to use any analogy, the most powerful tool of learning. They may also tend to pay too much attention to the particular features and ignore the many common ones that they can use without any difficulty. Eventually, their performance will be affected.

From the perspective of the learning process, it is impossible to acquire new information without old information. What is the same or similar is considered as old information while what is different is new information. New things are usually learned by comparing and contrasting with the old, either consciously or unconsciously. Moreover, analogy is a most powerful way of learning. There is no analogy without what is already known. The characteristics of adult learner is the power of comparing and contrasting, as supposed to child language acquisition, which is characterized by imitation. It is certainly helpful to try to use some of the features and findings from child language acquisition,

but one cannot force an adult to learn like a child. In our enthusiasm to pursue the ideal learning situation, we tend to forget that one can lead a horse to the water but cannot make it drink.

As teachers, we are also concerned what kind of picture we present to the students about anything we teach. If there are more sameness than differences between the two languages, it's fair that the students have that picture. Having a correct frame will be important for the learning process in the long run. Universality is the wood while particularity is the tree. We don't want our students to be so obsessed with each individual tree that they have no general picture of the wood.

Again take phonology as the example, if a high percentage of all the sounds is similar between the two languages, the students have the right to know that and feel encouraged to take advantage of this fact. The subtle differences between those similar sounds should also be explained. Drill on the particular features of Chinese is important, but awareness and practice on similar sounds cannot be ignored. At least at the beginning stage, it is a good way to get started. Considering the relative weight of the universal features, we just cannot afford to leave it alone and just concentrate on the particularities. The principle to keep in mind is that universality is strategic while particularity is tactic. On the strategic level, such as setting the objectives for the course, one should bear in mind the universality of languages, while for each class, the particularity of the language can be

stressed, but not to the point that the students would think of the differences between the two languages all the time. One example in dealing with this whole versus part relation can be illustrate by curriculum design and class presentation. In curriculum design, one should think of language as a whole, with the universal features introduced at the beginning of the course; while presenting a particular pattern or feature in a given class, particularity is on the foreground.

One reason for the neglect of the overwhelming common features between Chinese and other languages is the confusion between research and teaching. In spite of the fact that these two things are closely linked, the focus of attention in each is quite different by nature. In research, people tend to pay more attention to particularity because it gives people something to talk about, while similarities sound weak and it is difficult to make a case out of it. Think of the fashion world, it is the differences, or uniqueness, that attract people's attention, and not the similarity.

Under the influence of publications, especially those in the early years of Contrastive Analysis, some teachers also take it for granted that the so called unique features are the focus of teaching. Another reason, already mentioned earlier, is the stress on the structure, or form, of the language in traditional teaching. The nature of teaching, however, dictates that sameness is the base to which new information can be added. If this is the case, priority should be given to universal features and not particular

ones. More will be discussed later in light of the revelation of the priority in teaching and testing.

To give priority of universals over particulars is also justified by the change of time. For years, or since the start of language study, the proclaimed aim of learning a foreign language is often an object of study. Most programs end up with an advanced degree in literature. To learn language for the purpose of communication is a relatively new phenomenon. It goes without saying that if one wants to learn to use a foreign language for practical purposes, the best approach is to spend the minimum amount of time and get the maximum result in communication. To use an extreme example, a brief explanation about the similarity between all the diphthongs in both English and Chinese and some practice will help the students master many sounds in the language within a relatively short period, while the same amount of time is hardly enough for even one particular sound, like the variation of /i/ after *j, s, ch*. This of course does not mean that particular features should be ignored. It is a matter of sooner or later in sequence and more or less in the amount of time.

To conclude, the particularity of Chinese, or any foreign language for that matter, has been so stressed in teaching that the many common features it shares with other languages are overshadowed. Given the reasons discussed above, I would stress that due attention be paid to universality, or the common features of the language, rather than just to the particularity, or the unique features the language. Exactly what does it mean to

establish priority in universality? This will lead us to the revelation of such a concept in teaching and testing Chinese.

Elsewhere (Wu 1990), I discussed the differences between a linguistic approach and the traditional approach to teaching Chinese and between the spoken form over the written form. What is relevant here is that languages have more similarities in their spoken form. To place universality above particularity would therefore mean the priority of the spoken form. A few facts about the Chinese language may be helpful here. To function as a literate person, one has to know more than 3,000 characters. A six-credit course (one semester) at Georgetown University introduces approximately 175 characters. Programs at different colleges and universities may vary, but the range is between 100 to 300. Even at the higher end of it, it would take about 5 years to reach the 3,000 goal, if we assume that all characters learned are remembered.

To be able to speak the language, however, the situation is much simpler. There are only 416 basic syllables in the Chinese language, or 1,295 counting the tones. During the acquisition of the spoken form, the major task would be to make the association between sound and meaning, a process similar to learning any Indo-European language. To concentrate on the spoken form at the beginning stage thus exemplifies the principle of putting universality before particularity in teaching. It has been proven to be effective by practice in FSI and other institutions (Wu 1990).

In terms of teaching, it would mean the priority of function over form. If all teachers agree that performance, or the ability to use Chinese appropriately when needed, is the final aim while competence, or the knowledge about Chinese, is the means to achieve the aim, the situation would be quite different. When designing a curriculum, what is expected from the students would be the ability to function in the Chinese environment and to use the language creatively. It would also mean proficiency-oriented teaching in the classroom. This is where the challenge of the teacher comes in. Given knowledge of the teacher and the preparation already done, it is certainly not hard to talk for 50 minutes about the language. The most challenging task for a teacher is not to explain, but to motivate, to create a situation in which the students can participate and practice.

An other revelation for such a concept can be seen in the field of testing. Just like the close link between universal features and the spoken form, so is the link between universality and proficiency test. Particularity, on the other hand, can be regarded as closely related to achievement test. If we concentrate on the universal features of the Chinese language in the test, it would be much easier to test a great number of students across the board regardless of the particular curricula they are in. After all, an A score in TLCC (Twenty Lectures on Chinese Culture) can show very little what a students can do with the language in real life situations.

Due to the perspective of the discussion, universality seems

to dominate all the discussion in this paper. Two clarifications should be made here. One is that by stressing the importance of universal features, I am not saying that particularity should be cast aside. On the contrary, when it comes to tactic, particularity plays an important role. After all, features are learned one by one. It is on the strategic level that universality should have the foreground. The other is the depth of any comparison and suggestions given. These are meant to be examples to illustrate the issue, and not concrete steps to follow.

It certainly needs more research to come up with a detailed plan for the implementation of such a concept. Some of the features that would characterize the priority of universality over particularity, however, can be summed up as follows:

(1) A period of considerable length of time at the beginning of a Chinese program is devoted to the spoken form of the language;

(2) Within each week, a certain proportion of classroom time is allocated for aural and oral practice;

(3) Whenever possible, common features among languages are stressed and used as the starting point for introducing particular features;

(4) Features unique to Chinese should receive due attention, but not exaggerated to the extent of a distorted picture of the language.

(5) Proficiency tests are administered regularly during the program;

(6) Final grade of the students are based on their performance

in real life and not the knowledge of the textbook they have covered.

Finally, what has been discussed in this paper is not about right or wrong, universality and particularity of a language is like two sides of the same coin. The discussion here is intended to present the other side of the coin that has been neglected. It is a fact that most programs in Chinese at the university have only a very limited amount of time. Instead of trying to get everything and perhaps end up with nothing, it may be wiser to strive for an attainable goal, especially at the lower end of the program. Eventually, one has to have both sides if learning is to be successful. By bringing up the neglected side, it is hoped that a more comprehensive view will be taken in teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

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